



### New style internet chat rooms

Website chat rooms have long been popular with young people. However there are now new style websites more commonly known as 'social networking sites' which include: BEBO, FACEBOOK, FRIENDSTER, HI5, LIVEJOURNAL, MYSPACE, XANGA, TAGGED, LIVEWORLD which young people are signing up to.

Social networking websites are virtual communities which allow users to share music files, photographs and videos – anything that can be stored on a computer.

A typical home page will feature a user's interests, a photo gallery, video clips, a blog (online diary) and message board. Message boards are a way to post messages to friends and allow other users to post comments.

Young people actively socialise on the internet which is why they enjoy social networking sites. They can express themselves, discuss topics, communicate with friends and meet new people.

When you sign up to a 'social network site' you will be encouraged to e-mail your friends with your home page details and for them to add you to their list of contacts. If you have a friend who is not already a member they may choose to join up to the website as well.

Whilst often these sites have systems in place with regards to safety – such as minimum ages and a system to report abuse – many sites have systems in place to safeguard users but it ultimately comes down to personal responsibility. It can be lots of fun, but there is also scope for these systems to be abused. When a young person is added or has access to various friends' homepages a list of contacts will grow rapidly. What at first appears to be an opportunity for general chat and sharing of information among friends expands quickly to new online contacts who may access your home page viewing all your photos, personal information and video clips. This means that any thing shared is never private but is for general viewing in a vast open arena.

There are three main categories of problems with social networking:

1. ID theft, fraud and privacy abuses:
2. Cyber bullying, cyber stalking and harassment:
3. Sexual predators, con artists and sexual exploitation

#### What can parents do to protect their children?

Talk to your child and equip them with the skills to use the internet safely. [www.childnet-in.org](http://www.childnet-in.org) has produced leaflets to help parents with this.

There are many ways to access the internet away from the family setting including many mobile phones and game players so it is important to help your child to develop their understanding of the internet, with a sense of responsibility when on line.

Don't worry if you feel that your child knows more than you regarding internet use. What is required is good communication between you with some ground rules in place for your peace of mind and their protection.

It is preferable to have the family computer in a general living area rather than in a bedroom enabling you to more easily take an active interest in how your child spends their time on line. Just as you would check-out your child's friends, you may wish to check together with your child their profiles/blogs and who is visiting them. You may be added to the 'friends list'.

### What is Cyber bullying?

Cyber bullying is the bullying of children and young people using technology such as mobile phones or computers, and some examples include malicious text messages and the posting of harmful images on social networking sites. This type of bullying is particularly worrying as home is no longer a refuge for children experiencing this type of bullying. To find out more about cyber bullying please visit [www.stoptextbully.com](http://www.stoptextbully.com)

### What can my child do to keep safe on a social networking site?

Social networking sites are often anonymous and therefore users may not know the real identity of those they are speaking to. People can lie about their age, their gender, their interests and anything else. Cyber friends are not real friends. Ensure your children understand the dangers of meeting with a cyber friend in person.

- Don't share too much personal information such as telephone numbers, addresses, schools or other information that could lead to their identity.
- Be careful and be selective in what information you place on your homepage.
- Remember that these sites are a public space.
- Sharing of photographs online is a frequent occurrence however young people need to remember not to post anything that could embarrass them now or in the future or expose them to danger. When sharing a group photo it is important to get permission from the group members. Once a picture is uploaded you will have no control over it. A picture can be altered and placed anywhere so think before you 'click' on send.
- Only let personal friends see your home page/profile.
- Passwords protect anything personal: don't pick one that's easy to guess.
- Protect your PC with spyware/firewall software.
- Ensure email account and social networking accounts are password protected.
- Suggest to your child that they use privacy tools available on most social networking sites that enables them to choose who they share information with.
- Advise your child to use a free email service such as yahoo or hotmail as this enables them to delete their account and profile without being linked directly to a specific computer.
- Ask your child to set up a secret code word with their friends. That way if they are unsure who they are talking to they can request the code word and know who it is.
- Do not communicate with strangers, remember that people aren't always who they say they are
- Don't post information which 'you wouldn't want the world to know'
- Don't spend all you time online, spend time with your family and friends offline

If you would like help with any family issue, please ring Parents Advice Centre for guidance and support on freephone 0808 8010 722 or email [parents@pachelp.org](mailto:parents@pachelp.org)

The Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum has over 20 organisations working together to create an environment free from bullying for children and young people. To find out more please visit [www.savethechildren.org.uk/niabf](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/niabf) or email [niabf@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:niabf@savethechildren.org.uk)